

The Professional Educator

Auburn University - Association of Teacher Educators

Volume I

Fall 1978

Number 2

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Admission to Teacher Education: Some Promising Developments

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A vintage copy of the Master Plan for Teacher Education prepared by a task force of the Alabama Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) in 1971, emerged from a box of books during a recent unpacking session. As I thumbed through the publication, my memory returned to two basic items of information uncovered in establishing a data base for that study.

In a rather comprehensive survey of the Alabama public school teacher, the Alabama Education Association (AEA), supported by the Research Division of the National Education Association (NEA), focused upon the career choices of teachers. The first inquiry of interest employed a Likert response scale and requested teachers to indicate, "If they had it to do over again, would they choose teaching as a career?" Only 48% of the respondents in the representative

sample said that they certainly would plan a teaching career if given a chance to begin again.¹ These figures were down significantly and perhaps alarmingly from a 1965-66 study when 61% took the strongly positive position about choosing teaching as a career. The second response possibility asked teachers to indicate if they intended to be in teaching during the next school year. More than eight out of every ten teachers responded in the affirmative.²

Some of my colleagues felt at the time that I overreacted to these two points of information. However, when considered jointly, do they not tend to say that a considerable number of teachers in classrooms in Alabama are not really sure that they want to be there? Does not this interpretation of the data raise some serious concerns about the processes of admission to teacher education programs and subsequently into the profession?

Needless to say, one may not be able to rationalize that Alabama is a special case. If this is a problem, it certainly becomes more than Alabama's problem if another item of baseline data has merit: of the graduates of teacher preparation programs in Alabama, 22% enter the profession in states other than Alabama.

A line of reasoning introduced into a final oral examination for the doctoral degree by the graduate school's representative, who happened to be a linguist, renewed my concerns recently. He explained that minority groups and disadvantaged pupils with limited language ability tend to have an unusually strong ability to interpret non-verbal communication. This information, when considered in light of the two survey items and when tempered further by the current move toward unitary school programs, emphasizes with even more significance the need to insure that teachers in classrooms really want to be there. The messages projected by dissatisfied or uncertain practitioners possibly are more damaging than any positive influences they might provide if we acknowledge the increasing body of knowledge relative to the affective dimensions of teacher-student interaction.

A review of the admission procedures employed by Alabama teacher education institutions reveals some references to such variables as "personal qualities necessary for teaching success and commitment to the task." Little evidence was found that many procedures are now in use which adequately get at these elusive dimensions. Primarily, decisions seem to be based on easily quantifiable variables, such as grade point averages in general education, scores on standardized tests of language skills, and results of screening tests for speech, hearing, and sight defects. While these data are important and should continue to be a part of the accumulated information, the decision as to who goes into our classrooms must come from more substantial insights.

Current efforts to develop the teaching role as a

helping relationship, with emphasis given to the human relations and group process skills needed to work successfully with children as they become self-directional, responsible decision-makers, call for new directions in admission to teacher education procedures. Ways must be found to assess the degree to which a potential teacher is compatible with the helping relationship demands of teaching, is equipped with or oriented toward the development of adequate human and group process skills to support such a definition of the teaching role, and exhibits the desired self-directional, responsibility-assuming behavior which provides adequate models for students with whom they work.

The picture is not necessarily bleak in this area. Promising trends may be cited. The emphasis upon early and continuous laboratory experiences as an integral part of the preparation process under the revised National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards is a positive move. Such programs should provide opportunities for potential teachers to assess through systematic and continuous introspection their interest in, ability for, and orientation toward a career in the classroom. However, student introspection alone is not enough. Professionals in preparation programs, possibly through the developing group process and facilitative behavior training programs, must be willing to assist student who may not be willing to face reality to opt out of the profession. A promising trend is the move to the counseling field for assistance in designing program experiences to assess and develop the facilitative and interpersonal dimensions of teaching as a helping profession.

Another significant step is the development of individualized preparation programs which place increased responsibilities upon the future teachers for their own learning. Such programs should provide ample knowledge relative to the self-directional dimension which was mentioned earlier. Of a group of 33 students in a major

southern institution who were part of a pilot effort with such a slant, only one student failed to finally respond to the self-directional demands of the program. A further dividend with potential from such programs seems to be an in-depth understanding of and appreciation for individualized programs. Should not graduates who have experienced individualized and personalized learning be able more readily to translate this into their classroom behavior with students?

The move toward competency based preparation programs seems to hold some promise. Certainly a definition of preparation programs in terms of desired behaviors and role competencies is a step beyond the definition of programs in terms of courses and credit hours. However, as progress is made in this direction, constant caution must be exercised so that teaching does not become a mechanistic, stimulus-response, fragmented process.

Another development with potential impact is the beginning realization by teacher preparation institutions that they can only prepare a person to "begin to become a teacher." Such tempering of past overzealous beliefs coupled with the emerging marriage of pre-service preparation with demonstrated performance as a basis of full professional certification extends beneficially the admissions-retention process. A dimension of this focus upon successful practice is the additional

opportunity to involve the appropriate local school personnel in the decision-making process relative to granting full rights to the classroom arena.

The maturing profession of teaching eventually must come to grips with this shared responsibility if full professional status is to be realized. An opportunity has been presented by the Congress for the organized profession to be responsibly involved through the emerging teacher center concept. Needless to say, the parity concept in this legislation raises meaningful questions for local system administrators and deans of education to deal with as we move ahead.

Some promising developments relative to the admission and retention process in teacher education may be emerging. The challenges to teaching as a profession cannot be met unless we persevere and move beyond the quantifiable but primitive procedures now utilized widely in admissions. The opportunity provided by the more adequate supply of teachers seems to indicate that the timing may be right for a concerted attack on this problem.

Footnotes

¹Alabama Public School Teacher, 1970-71, Alabama Education Association Research Division, Montgomery, May 1972.

²Ibid., p. 29.

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